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ABSTRACT

Failure to include nonnative English speaking students in a testing program, something that is especially important in a state where a high school graduation test is administered, can cost students the opportunity to practice for the test, as well as the opportunity for diagnosis of educational attainment and feedback about their progress. For some students, the solution to these problems lies in assessment in the student's native language. Content assessment in the native language, otherwise known as native language assessment, provides a measure of what students know and a gauge of their native language literacy development. Before a test is administered, teachers, counselors, and program administrators should review each student's need for special accommodations. Test accommodations, which can include reading instructions in the student's native language, response accommodations, and accommodations in setting or facilities, can help students demonstrate what they actually know, although caution must be observed in using interpreters or in using test translations, since either of these approaches can yield misleading results. Native language assessment is an option that provides a way to incorporate more students into assessment programs. (Contains three references.) (SLD)

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CONTENT ASSESSMENT IN THE NATIVE LANGUAGE

ERIC/AE Digest Series EDO-TM-96-02

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Content Assessment in the Native Language

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The Problem

For at least the past 15 years, education reform initiatives have emphasized the role of assessment in their endeavors. As a result, a wide variety of assessment programs have been initiated. As of 1994, forty-three states, following the example of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), had their own state assessment programs. These programs provide assessments of all students at particular grade levels in a variety of content areas.

The results of such programs are used for a variety of purposes. They can beutilized by elected and appointed state-level officials to monitor and evaluate the quality of education being provided by their respective states. At the state department of education level, results are often used to evaluate the quality of education provided by districts and to identify the districts and schools which are in need of improvement. District level results can also serve a similar function. Additionally, districts use test results to identify which students need special assisstance to meet the expected academic standards. The process of using mandated tests to evaluate schools as well as identify students in need of remediation gives such tests considerable importance within the educational system.

However, not all students are able to participate in the assessment program. Typically, schools defer or exempt students from participating if they cannot speak, read, and write English. Consequently, the test results obtained by schools often give an incomplete and, sometimes, misleading picture of the quality of student achievement at the school. In schools where there are a large number of non-native English speaking students, the school may exclude all of those students from participating in the assessment program. Thus, the official reported results may have little relationship to the actual status of educational achievement in the school.

When students do not participate in a mandatory testing program, they lose the benefits that participation provides. As implied above, these benefits include an assessment of their educational attainment in the content areas and the provision of appropriate remediation to those students who need it. When students are not tested, they can easily be overlooked and forgotten by the educational system. This is mainly because the absence of academic information about these students grants the educational system a kind waiver of responsibility for their educational achievement.

Failure to include non-native English speaking students in the testing program can be especially critical if the students live in a state where a high school graduation test is administered. According to a recent national survey (Rivera et al., 1995), nineteen states require students to pass a test or a battery of tests in order to obtain their high school diplomas. In nearly all states, those students who have not yet acquired English (henceforth these students will be referred to as English language learners as suggested by Rivera & LaCelle-Peterson, 1994) are also required to pass the graduation test. However, if they are English deficient, these students are routinely deferred from taking this test until they become English proficient or are seniors in high school. As a result of the deferral, the English language learners lose the opportunity to practice taking this important test. In addition to this, these students lose the opportunity for diagnosis of their educational attainment, feedback about their progress, and the possibility of appropriate remediation.

The Solution

For some students, a solution to the problems previously described is content assessment in the student's native language. Content assessment in the native language, otherwise known as native language assessment, involves eliminating the language barrier posed by tests written in English to a certain degree. Native language assessment provides a less biased indication of what students know and can do. It also can be used to identify gaps in the native language literacy development. Finally, if students are receiving content instruction in their native language, native language assessment can also serve as a way to measure the continued development of their content knowledge.

In order to incorporate English language learners into the testing program, special accommodations can be made for those students who do not yet have an adequate command of English to take a test written in English. These accommodations can take a variety of forms. In the remainder of this article, some practical approaches to

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accommodating English language learners into a district or state-mandated assessment program will be described.

Accommodations

Before the test is administered, teachers, counselors, or program administrators should review each student's need for special accommodations. This can be done by asking the following questions: 1) Can the student understand and follow oral directions in English? 2) Can the student read and understand written test directions in English? 3) Can the student read and understand objective (multiple-choice) test questions written in English? 4) Can the student write paragraph length responses to free response (open-ended) questions in English?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then one or more of the following accommodations may be appropriate.

- **Test Accomodations** can include an oral reading of test directions in the student s native language, the repeated reading and explanation of the test directions in English, a written translation of the test directions into the student's native language, a written translation of the test into the student's native language, an extended time limit, and the use of an interpreter to render the questions into the student s native language.
- **Response Accommodations** may consist of allowing the use a bilingual dictionary, giving the response orally in the student's native language, writing the response in the native language, and the use of an interpreter to write the student's response in English.
- **Setting\Facilities Accommodations** can involve permitting small group testing, individual testing, the use of a bilingual test administrator, and testing with an interpreter.

Cautionary Advice

Two notes of caution are appropriate. First, the use of an interpreter to translate questions into the student's native language and to assist the student by writing his response in English can easily lead to flawed test results. This may happen if the interpreter coaches the student to select or state the correct answer. If an interpreter is to be used, he must be carefully trained in order to avoid such situations. Nevertheless, an alternative to having the English response written directly by the interpreter is to allow the student to write the answer in his own native language. After the completion of the test, all of the responses would be translated into English by an interpreter. This adjustment in testing procedure might eliminate the potential for coaching.

A second accommodation which should be approached with care is the use of a translated version of the test. Not all components of a test are directly translatable. As a result, it is often more appropriate to refer to the non-English version of a test as an adaptation rather than a translation. In adapted tests, some test items are replaced by more suitable items selected from other forms, or some completely new items or item types are written. Generally speaking, tests which assess content knowledge are more directly translatable than tests that assess language. For example, in a subtest of spelling, where the student must identify the correct spelling of an underlined word, the translated version of that word may not pose a spelling problem in the student's native language. As a result, the translated test may give an inflated estimate of the student's spelling skills in the native language. Detailed technical recommendations on the adaptation of tests to other languages are found in Hambleton (1994).

Conclusion

Native language assessment is an option that provides a means of incorporating more students into assessment programs. It is particularly feasible in schools where large numbers of students speak the same non-English language. It is also possible to develop native language versions of a test in several languages. For instance, the New York State Department of Education offers its high school graduation test, the Regent s Competency Exam, in 20 languages. Additionally, the Rhode Island Department of Education currently offers native language versions of its tests for grades 4, 8, and 10 in four languages which include Spanish, Portuguese, Laotian, and Cambodian. Student s who respond in Spanish are scored in Spanish. Responses in Portuguese, Laotian, and Cambodian are translated to English and then scored. These very interesting innovations ensure that more comprehensive data is collected on student achievement and that schools strive to help all students attain high content standards.

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